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RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003985

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SUBJECT: MOD PERMSEC DISCUSSES THAI POLITICAL SITUATION

REF: BANGKOK 1754 [BETTER LIVING THROUGH ISOC]

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Junta member GEN Winai predicted that Army chief GEN Sonthi would run for political office after he retires in September. Winai himself denied having any political plans, and said he plans to remain as MOD Permsec.

He predicted that the constitution would pass the August referendum. Winai defended the draft internal security act, although he recognized that there were concerns about giving considerable new authority to the Army chief, and suggested that the law might be changed to put someone else in charge of the new security structure created. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) GEN Winai Phattayul reviewed key political issues with Ambassador and DCM on July 19. (GEN Winai is both MOD Permsec and Secretary-General of the Council for National Security (CNS) - the "coup council" -- giving him an insider perspective on Thai political developments.) Winai anticipated that the draft constitution would pass in the referendum to be held on August 19, and that the elections would be held by the end of the year. He noted that one faction of the former ruling Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) was campaigning against the constitution, but he speculated that they were primarily trying to flex their muscles now, and show that they still had some influence. He did not anticipate they would succeed in blocking the adoption of the new constitution. The Ambassador suggested that the political situation was clarifying, but the question remained: who would the former TRT voters have to vote for in the upcoming election? GEN Winai pointed out that TRT had essentially split into four factions, implying that TRT supporters would have a choice among the parties that would form from these factions.

3. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question, Winai predicted that Army Commander/CNS chief GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin would enter politics when he retires from the military in September. The Ambassador advised that Sonthi staying out of politics was the best option for him if he wanted to keep his honor. However, if he was determined to try a political career, then he should not seek an appointed position; he could run for a constituency seat in the Parliament, like anyone else. Winai said that he personally planned to stay as Permsec for another year, and then retire. Following up on press reports, the Ambassador asked about the possibility that GEN Sonthi could use "Rak Chart," a new party forming under the leadership of a businessman, as his

political vehicle. Winai replied non-committally, noting that this was possible.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador raised concerns about the new internal security law; many people believe this law would give excessive power to the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) which is headed by the Army commander (reftel). The Ambassador asked why the government was rushing this law through now. GEN Winai replied that it would probably not be possible to get the law passed through an elected parliament, given the controversies around it. He defended the law, saying every country in the region had an Internal Security Act. He said that the new authority given to ISOC would not be abused because, "our citizens wouldn't stand for it." Winai conceded that there were concerns about the powers given to the Army commander, and he suggested that it would be better to have some other official, not the Army chief, at the head of ISOC.

¶5. (C) Comment: The leaders of last September's coup are looking for a soft landing after the return to elected government. It is now generally believed that Army commander GEN Sonthi is looking to enter politics; Winai's prediction is no surprise. Winai has one more year until he retires, so he can retain the security of a post in the MOD. His name has been mentioned as a contender for Army commander, but he would probably also be content to remain as Permsec. We are encouraged by his comments about the constitution and the possibility of changing the draft the internal security act (which is highly unpopular and causing much concern.) We hope that, as the CNS gains more confidence that the transition is going smoothly, they will be less likely to try to restrict political speech and civil liberties.

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